

All
in the
Same Boat

Transcending Difficult Times through the 4 Rs--Resilience,
Relationship, Respite and Renewal

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PART I

Living a Conscious Life

CHAPTER ONE

Transformation through the Four Rs

When we become aware that we do not have to escape our pains, but that we can mobilize them into a common search for life, those very pains are transformed expressions of despair into signs of hope.

Henri Nouwen

A friend of mine watched as her mom and sisters were trying on and modeling her fancy hats and stylish coats, picking and choosing the ones they wanted while sharing memories and laughter. They also shared photos with friends and family on social media, connecting more of us to this delightful experience.

What made it so special is that my friend was watching from her hospital bed in the living room, facing end-stage cancer, knowing she would never wear those gorgeous hats and coats again. But she found joy in this simple, silly activity with her beloved family. They were all feeling courage and acceptance that it was okay, and letting themselves enjoy the moment.

For her, she was firm in her faith and believed that she was going on to a better place; her sisters and mother knew they had said and done everything they needed to for their precious girl. There were no regrets, no self-pity, no fighting against fate, but rather a sense of acceptance and peace, as they had made it an opportunity to celebrate her life, value their relationships, and see the beauty of loving each other and enjoying their final days together.

This illustrates the ideas behind this book—that we can rise

above the challenges and find the blessings they hold while being present to the experience, deepening our relationships, strengthening our spiritual connections, and learning new skills. We can boldly face down the trials and emerge on the other side, whole and strong, where life begins anew. At the very least, we can find peace and acceptance of *what is*, knowing we have done and been all that we could.

This reminds me of the line from *Desiderata*: “And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.”¹ When tragedy and disaster happen, it is not easy to accept and believe that life is unfolding as it should. We humans have a natural desire to resist that concept. But in hindsight, very often we can see the meaning more clearly, and at the very least, see certain opportunities or gifts that came from even the worst ordeals. Not that the ordeals are fair, deserved, or needed to happen, but that, now that they have happened, we can accept them, and make peace with them.

No one is unaffected by pain and loss; no one escapes disappointment and disaster. We say it is the human condition to struggle and suffer. But it is also in us to stand firm or get back up, to have faith and hope, to survive and keep going. To learn from our mistakes. To face tragedy and spit in its eye. To find humor in the direst of situations.

Transcending our trials and holding onto hope and optimism are spiritual skills that help us cope—help us live more fully and consciously, be strengthened rather than defeated, choose hope rather than despair, and ascend higher into the light rather than descend into the darkness.

There is a common piece of wisdom that says “pain is inevitable; suffering is optional” (Buddhist proverb). This means the suffering we endure is related to our perspective about what happens. An example is when fires enveloped a town and destroyed houses. A television interviewer spoke to two couples who had lost their homes. The first couple was understandably in deep devastation, with tears,

anger and anguish that they had lost everything—home, belongings, treasures.

The second couple interviewed said, “We are so grateful! Everything that matters is safe—our children, our dog, each other. We cannot believe the blessing of this—we could have lost everything, and we didn’t.” The “everything” to the two couples meant something different, and this made all the difference in their level of suffering.

The things that I experienced required me to figure out how to survive, cope and move forward. When many trials occurred at the same time at age fifty, I was shocked into a new awareness of my needs, feelings and reactions. I had to draw on deep inner wells of courage and strength, and I found that what I had believed and taught to clients for years became personally relevant and important in a totally new way. I had to *live* concepts I had known and taught, but had not fully practiced.

One of these concepts was living one day at a time. In more colorful language, I was flying by the seat of my pants, dealing with each new thing one at a time. I was forced to fully live in the present moment at that time, and the learning was integrated in a deeper and truer way than ever before. In profound ways, I was conscious, awake, and aware, and it allowed me to become a wiser, more mature person. Later, when I received a second cancer diagnosis, I again drew on this consciousness to get me through the treatment and recovery process, and again, learned and grew from the experience.

Taking Charge

An important aspect of dealing with unexpected setbacks is to not fight what we cannot change, but to take charge of our own responses and make the best of the situation.

One thing that I learned through my recovery from alcoholism was to allow myself to feel and express my emotions without judging

or suppressing them. This does not mean I got to spew out my feelings in a damaging and thoughtless way, but it does mean I was allowed to cry, to verbalize the confusion, frustration, and worry. It means I could be stressed out and in need of support.

I had the opportunity to use this understanding when I was struggling with the recent mind-numbing challenge of cancer and treatment. It let the people around me know to be helpful, caring, and available. It gave me relief, so I could move on and re-focus on the tasks at hand.

When I realized I was acting crabby or in self-pity I would work to stop it. Catching yourself in poor behavior and adjusting actions accordingly is a skill that can be learned and utilized by anyone and contributes to one's resilience. It starts with a willingness to be open.

This illustrates a core belief from which I have lived my life. It is the belief that I can change and improve as needed. Once I become aware of it and set my intention, I can generally turn a problematic situation around by looking inward and assessing what I need to do differently. I first understood this concept in the addiction recovery world, with the short version of the Serenity Prayer:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I
cannot change, the courage to change the things
I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.
(Reinhold Neibuhr)

We do not get to choose the things that happen to us, nor can we change their nature. Consciously *deciding* to rise above events is where we have true power. Transforming difficult and painful events into opportunities for enriching experiences is a choice. I learned that much in life cannot be changed: circumstances, events, and other people. Grasping my powerlessness to change most things that are unpleasant and unwelcome became important work. Letting go of trying to control those things and gaining acceptance was critical but not easy.

